

Sen. Coons, colleagues introduce legislation to significantly expand national service programs to respond to COVID-19

Bill would multiply the number of Americans who can serve each year through AmeriCorps, increase compensation to make it possible for all to serve

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WASHINGTON — Today, U.S. Sens. Chris Coons (D-Del.), Jack Reed (D-R.I.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Ed Markey (D-Mass.), Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), and Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) announced the introduction of legislation to expand national service programs as the country works to respond and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The *Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act* would fund 750,000 national service positions over a three-year response and recovery period, in part to meet the projected need for as many as 300,000 public health workers. Under the bill, the number of AmeriCorps and national service positions could expand from 75,000 to 150,000 the first year and double to 300,000 in years two and three. The bill would also expand partnerships between AmeriCorps and federal health agencies and increase the AmeriCorps living allowance to ensure all Americans can step up to serve regardless of their financial circumstances. The Senators are actively working to include this bill in the next COVID-19 relief package set to be considered by the Senate.

This is the first of three proposals under development by a working group of Senate Democrats to address the urgent need to expand the public health and response workforce during and in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. Additional proposals to expand public health agencies' workforces and the clinical health care workforce will follow over the course of this week.

"Americans have a long history of responding to national calls to service in times of crisis," **said Senator Coons**. "Today, AmeriCorps members are already hard at work in our communities supporting students as they learn remotely, helping patients make critical care decisions, and more. These programs can and should be expanded to meet the needs of this moment. As we work to recover from the dual challenge of a public health crisis and an economic crisis, national service presents a unique opportunity for Americans to be part of our response and recovery while earning a stipend and education award and gaining marketable skills. Expanding these programs to all Americans who wish to serve should be a key part of our recovery effort."

"This is an unprecedented pandemic and it will take a massive, national effort to help America get through it, recover, and revive our economy. Throughout our history, whenever the nation has been in trouble, Americans have always answered the call to national service. This bill will ramp up our existing service framework and infrastructure for that type of unified, national effort that will expand opportunities, improve communities, and strengthen America," **said Senator Reed**.

"National service programs represent the best of our country. As we confront the coronavirus pandemic, we should be expanding these opportunities for Americans to serve their communities," **Senator Klobuchar said**. "I am proud to cosponsor the Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act, which will expand our national service programs and create major new opportunities for Americans to serve their country – including new digital tools to help Senior Corps members safely continue their service."

"Just as picking up a rifle to defend our country is 'American Service,' so is helping out a food pantry for those at risk of hunger, assisting students with remote education and helping patients make critical health care decisions," **Duckworth said**. "We should be doing everything we can to make sure these vital service programs are accessible to all Americans who wish to serve during times of crisis like these. That's why I'm proud to be working with Senator Coons and my colleagues to include this proposal—which builds on my 21st Century American Service Act—in the next relief package."

"We all have a role to play in rebuilding thriving communities across our nation in the aftermath of this pandemic," **said Senator Heinrich**. "As an AmeriCorps alum myself, I know how much value young people stepping up to national service opportunities can bring to the table. Investing in expanded national service programs will greatly aid in both our immediate response to this emergency and in our long-term recovery. The public health and economic challenges we are facing right now are like nothing Americans have experienced in nearly a century. We need to empower a new generation of leaders to become part of the solution."

"Throughout our history, Americans have always risen to the challenge to serve their country in times of crisis and the coronavirus pandemic is no different," **said Senator Markey**. "I'm pleased that this legislative effort incorporates key aspects of the UNITE Act, which I announced with Senator Van Hollen last week, through its robust commitment to the flagship AmeriCorps programs to aid our most vulnerable communities and its commitment to increase service opportunities for those left unemployed by the coronavirus emergency."

“For decades, our national service organizations have provided invaluable assistance to communities across our country and across the globe. With expertise in everything from public health to supply chain logistics to food security programs, Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and other national service volunteers are uniquely equipped to help our country battle the coronavirus. We should be doing everything in our power to enlist these men and women – and others who are eager to volunteer – in these efforts. That’s why Senator Markey and I first introduced the UNITE Act, and why I’m proud to build on that effort with this coalition and a comprehensive package,” **said Senator Van Hollen.**

“From the streets of communities across Connecticut to disaster relief zones in Puerto Rico, I have seen firsthand the invaluable impact of individuals who have answered the call for their country with fundamentally American acts of service,” **said Senator Blumenthal.**

“Participating in service helps reinforce the value of community and fosters important skills that benefit young volunteers for the rest of their lives. This is especially true during a national crisis, when our communities’ need is greatest and the potential impact of volunteers at its highest. I’m proud to be joining my colleagues in efforts to develop a new class of young leaders ready to respond to a nation in need.”

“For decades, our national service programs have provided valuable assistance and services to communities that needed it the most. These programs have been pivotal in bringing people together who share a common spirit of giving back to the community,” **Senator Durbin said.** “In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be more important than ever to marshal our community leaders and workers to address our health and economic needs. That is why I am proud to cosponsor the Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act with Senator Coons and my colleagues.”

The bill is supported by a number of national service organizations, including [Voices for National Service](#), [America’s Service Commissions](#), [The Corps Network](#), and the [Catholic Volunteer Network](#).

“National service has been an essential source of people power and ingenuity for our country at moments of great need – and AmeriCorps and Senior Corps members are once again stepping forward to serve where they are needed most during this pandemic,” **said AnnMaura Connolly, President of Voices for National Service.** “AmeriCorps members are integral to the COVID-19 response, serving at drive-thru testing sites, providing child care for health care workers, helping deliver food to our most vulnerable, supporting students struggling with distance learning and more. As we face the triple threat of a health, economic, and educational crisis, we should expand AmeriCorps so that every American is asked and given the opportunity serve to help our communities respond and recover. Our country needs their service now, perhaps more than ever. Voices for National Service is grateful to Senator Coons and his colleagues for their bold vision for expanding AmeriCorps as a transformational force for our country at this critical time.”

“America’s Service Commissions applauds Senators Duckworth, Coons, Reed, Heinrich, Markey, Van Hollen, Klobuchar, Blumenthal, and Durbin for their leadership in recognizing service as a strategic solution to addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Expanding AmeriCorps and the Volunteer Generation Fund is critical to engaging millions of Americans who want to serve their country in response to the pandemic while providing necessary funding to a hard-hit nonprofit and public sector,” **says Kaira Esgate, CEO of America’s Service Commissions (ASC).** “ASC and its network of the governor-led 52 state service commissions provide an essential infrastructure to the national service delivery system and have already swiftly responded to COVID-19 by deploying volunteers and AmeriCorps members from food banks to call centers. We stand ready to expand national service resources and engage the next generation of servant leaders to respond to our country’s rising needs due to COVID-19.”

"During the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt said that no country can afford the waste of human resources. During this current crisis, a bold investment in national service would mobilize and unite the American people to confront a myriad of needs, ranging from food pantry operations to contact tracing," **said Mary Ellen Sprenkel, President and CEO of The Corps Network.** "We extend our appreciation to Sen. Coons, Sen. Heinrich and other leaders in Congress for championing the critical role AmeriCorps and Senior Corps can play in helping our country through these unprecedented times."

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- Prioritize funding for activities directly related to our response and recovery, such as: public health services, emergency logistics, workforce and reemployment services, education support (including for adult learners), and services that combat nutrition insecurity.
- Ensure that individuals’ financial resources do not limit participation by increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance to 175 percent of the federal poverty line and tying the value of the Segal Education Award to the cost of two years of public university tuition, harmonizing the treatment of both with other programs by making them nontaxable.
- Fund new online tools for Senior Corps to safely move to a teleservice model.
- Extend priority enrollment to Peace Corps, U.S. Fulbright, and AmeriCorps participants whose service or grants was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and encourage participation by members of low-income and minority communities, those who have had contact with the juvenile justice system, and those of diverse abilities.

- Invite participation by a diverse range of Americans by launching an awareness and outreach campaign on response service opportunities and supporting the Volunteer Generation Fund.

For a one-pager on the bill, please [click here](#).

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